

Secretive organisation: anarchism after platform capitalism

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Abstract

Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter's *Organization After Social Media* interrogate what our relation to the Internet in general, social media platforms, and organised networks in particular should be after botched Twitter revolutions, NSA counter-insurgencies and a rising disillusionment with “platform capitalism.” Seeking to find a way for activists to operate in secret networks the authors suggest a future between what they see as the double pitfalls of crises-ridden conventional organisations and offline romanticism.

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Book Review

Lovink, Geert and Ned Rossiter. *Organization After Social Media*.
Colchester, 2018.

In his first book, *The Net Delusion*, Evgeny Morozov showed how our most celebrated, and purportedly emancipatory communication platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, “could equally be turned against the very activists, dissidents and causes we were trying to promote.” In 2011, when this book came out, many Internet activists and most Western governments believed that “dictators ... were too dumb, too disorganized, too technophobic” to understand the Internet, so that this new wave of information technology inevitably would bring about their downfall (Morozov 2015; 2011).

Today it seems that this, the last of our Internet euphorias, has died away. We have experienced the rise and fall of Napster, the botched Twitter revolutions of the Arab Spring, and the counter-insurgencies of the NSA. What is left of the Internet but a huge, global shopping mall, increasingly dominated by a few mega corporations that has amassed for themselves what could easily be mistaken for monopoly power (Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft)?

It is against such a scenario of rising disillusion that Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter have launched their latest missive on the topic of

activism and organisation in “the corporate Internet garden.” The problem with our submission to these Disneyfied make-believe worlds of “friends,” “likes,” and “conversations” is that those who post and participate under the pretence of getting something for nothing (purportedly free access to the world's largest communication platform, fun techniques to arouse new and old friends, etc.) in actuality work for free by feeding the increasingly sophisticated algorithms generated on the basis of user data, willingly provided by billions of subscribers.

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Beyond the production of an as yet unknown precision in delivering potential consumers to advertisers, Facebook and other behemoths have demonstrated their willingness to participate in political and military surveillance operations. When we join in the corporate game of Internet communication we end up as what Maurizio Lazzarato has referred to as “indebted man:” by feeding the network algorithms of social media we serve as generators of economic value for media corporations and finance capital. Social media technologies have become gigantic extraction machines.

Turning to the political uses of social media Lovink and Rossiter’s outlook becomes even more gloomy: observe how politicians and political machineries exploit Facebook and Twitter in their campaigns and as tools for political domination. We have finally reached what the authors refer to as “platform capitalism:” after the conquest of the Internet by managerialism Internet social media has been reduced to instruments of governance in the sense of serving both as policy tools and as research objects. However, as Lovink and Rossiter aptly remark, this kind of research is intensely limited by the way its schemas of intelligibility are already marked by hegemonic operations.

As we get increasingly submerged in the labour of “working for the timeline” – posting updates, photos of friends and family, writing the “story of our lives,” etc. – we get to do nothing but sending “signals to friends we’ve never met ... that we’re still in the rat race: look at me, I am still alive, do not forget me” (Lovink and Rossiter 2018, 15). This sadly forgettable celebrity-self withers away on our endless search for short-lived “fame,” a quest that finds its culmination in what the authors call the “festival economy,” or the society of events. Obliquely referencing Guy Debord’s classic *Society of the Spectacle*, Lovink and Rossiter suggest that the present surge of mediated “events” appears as a tragic and slightly obscene negation of Debord’s social diagnosis: we now live under the aegis of a corporate order punctuated by occasional carnivalesque ruptures, revolts without consequences, and “short ties,” i.e. Facebook friendships and corporate loneliness generated by architectures that incite passive-aggressive behaviour.

When Lovink and Rossiter sketch a way out of this conundrum they do so by warning against what they see as a double pitfall: on the one hand they advise that we avoid the “crisis of conventional organisations,” and, on the other, we should be wary of what they call offline romanticism. To take their first warning first, traditional sources of authority, such as the Church, trade unions, political parties, and social movements are losing ground. Decoupled from constituencies they are no longer able to muster collective passions or mobilise large groups into action. The authors submit that we are living in an “in-between time,” a domain where the great revolutionary upheaval has come and is yet to come. We are living in a long interval, where “there is time to build sustainable networks, exchange ideas, set up working groups” (2018, 12). Their purpose is therefore to show how organised networks break with the logic of updating and monitoring, and instead facilitate an ethos of “getting things done.”

It is here that we also arrive at what is perhaps the weakest link in their argument. Bordering on the pragmatic, Lovink and Rossiter fail to pursue what it is precisely that needs to be done, apart from some rather loose winks to “organic food suppliers, hipster maker economies, co-working spaces, urban gardens and renewable energies” (2018, 7). Since there is no common project, no organisation to coordinate ends and means, the authors are reduced to noncommitting statements regarding the use of digital networks. In their view there is no recourse to the totality offered by the political party, and therefore the only potential outside of state organisation is found in anarchic organisation, and their main question is now longer a *what* or *when*, but simply a *how*.

Explicitly attempting to shift the ground from a Leninist party model, with its dependency on submission, mobilisation, and party programme, Lovink and Rossiter put forward the General Assembly and its contemporary extension, the general network intellect, as alternatives. An intervention from above, such as the *putsch* or revolutionary organisation serves to dictate and so abolishes the task of “forging a global grammar able to design concepts that critique and direct debates on issues and conditions in order to regain the initiative” (2018, 8).

On the other hand, the authors warn against what they see as a resurgence of “assembly strategies” from movements such as Occupy. Here, they find an “offline romanticism” that can only be countered by a smarter and more forceful organisation in networks. Against their argument regarding a certain “retromania of discrediting digital networks” we should note that digital networks have their existence predicated on material flows. This state of affairs became particularly evident in the debate concerning two tiered access to Internet a few years ago, and the material and economic muscle of certain Internet Service Providers to force through a class-based system of access. In a world where a global middle-class is increasingly reduced to sub-standard access, denied entry into large swaths of

the digital order, and so on, they may have no other option than to organise the old-fashioned analogue way: in meetings, clubs, unions, etc., to formulate demands, find common ground, and establish the required apparatus to leverage the force necessary to make their voices heard.

Even when Lovink and Rossiter abandon the political party they nevertheless acknowledge the necessity of “going underground:” after the Snowden and NSA calamities they advocate secret networks and hidden structures as ways to maintain knowledge, power and the ability to act in an increasingly hegemonic global order of surveillance and monopoly. How do we live autonomously of global techniques of capture, they ask, and the answer they supply is largely linked to new technologies of encryption, organised networks, and resistance to algorithmic monopoly on decision.

Declaring that today’s revolts emerge from a collective unconscious of accumulated discontent, they advise that at the next level encryption will shift from single to collective users, so that entire groups can communicate without the possibility of outside surveillance or interference. In such a world, the authors suggest, we can finally break with the neoliberal assumption of an individual hero operating on subjective impulse. Instead activists can inhabit organised networks that are both virtual and real, making their organisations sustainable in a world of perpetual flux.

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